The Origins of the Racial Gap in School Suspension and Expulsion

Jayanti Owens, Brown University, Providence, RI
Sara McLanahan, Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

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ABSTRACT

In spite of widespread recognition that racial disparities in suspension and expulsion perpetuate racial inequality, why racial disparities exist remains an open empirical question. Using a dataset of 5,000 children in 2,560 schools across 20 cities, we provide the first analysis to jointly parse the relative contributions of four of the most prominent structural and social-psychological explanations. Highlighting the contextually-dependent nature of these disparities, we find that the concentration of Black youth in majority-minority schools and the harsher sanctioning of Black boys from father-absent families account for the majority of the race gap. Contrary to popular belief, racial differences school-entry behavioral development, family social class, and harsher punishment for the same misbehaviors are secondary contributors. Consequently, we argue that while open displays of racism have become less common, racism has morphed, presenting through punitive discipline in many minority-serving schools, and, interpersonally, through negative stereotyping of Black boys from father-absent families.